

# ***How RESTORATIVE Is AVP?***

***EVALUATING THE  
ALTERNATIVES TO VIOLENCE PROJECT  
ACCORDING TO A RESTORATIVE JUSTICE YARDSTICK***

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***HOW RESTORATIVE IS AVP?***  
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What do you get when prison inmates ask Quakers to help them develop a program about nonviolence? What happens to this program over twenty-five years of evolution, as it expands to hundreds of prisons, schools, and communities in fifteen different countries?

The Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) continues to grow out of these two questions. In 1975, an inmate group at Greenhaven Prison in New York, known as the Think Tank, partnered with Quakers in the area to develop the first AVP workshop. The program is based on the belief that there is a power in everyone that can transform hostility and destructiveness into cooperation and community. Weekend workshops that experientially explored this topic quickly spread to other prisons. In the last 25 years, thousands of prison inmates have completed weekend AVP workshops. AVP workshops now happen in many places outside of prisons, but in this paper I will focus on AVP as it works in correctional facilities.

Restorative Justice (RJ) is a philosophical and practical framework for seeing crime and our responses to crime. RJ views crime as primarily a harm done to people that needs to be restored. RJ asks how the harms of victims, the community, and offenders can be healed. RJ also asks how offenders can take responsibility for the harm of their crimes, and help make it right. Since the 1970s, the popularity and application of RJ has grown rapidly in the United States and several other countries. The most well known programmatic expression of RJ in the U.S. today is Victim/Offender Conferencing or Mediation, but the variety of RJ applications is growing quickly.

In this paper, I will look at where the strands of Restorative Justice and the Alternatives to Violence Project meet. How well does AVP fit with the restorative principles and values expressed in the RJ framework? What could AVP learn from the questions RJ poses? AVP aims to contribute to the restoration of offenders and communities. How would AVP look different if it took seriously the questions and vision of RJ?

I am writing this essay based on my experience with AVP, as well as my conversations with others involved in AVP and/or Restorative Justice. I envision this paper as one part of an ongoing discussion about the intersections between AVP and Restorative Justice. I also see these ideas as part of a broader discussion of what the practice of Restorative Justice can look like in prisons.

My hope is that some of these ideas could be used by myself and others to modify and expand the way AVP workshops are done. At the same time, I believe that AVP has developed a focus that works powerfully, and I don't

expect AVP to be entirely reshaped by RJ ideas. I believe there is an increasing demand for programs similar in methodology to AVP, but with more explicit connection to some RJ principles. As these other programs develop, I hope they can learn from the successes of AVP in prisons. Several offshoots of AVP are already in practice (for youth, for prison staff, etc.)--and I see the ideas in this paper as potential fertilizer for new RJ/AVP hybrids. I also will think through how AVP could strengthen partnerships with other RJ programs, to be a more integral part of the RJ movement.

After introducing AVP and how it currently reflects some principles of Restorative Justice, I will explore the implications of some specific RJ principles for AVP. The categories I will cover are:

- Awareness of victim impact and harm

- Inmate accountability
- Supporting inmates in repairing harms done by their crimes
- Building partnerships with other RJ groups
- Building connections with the rest of the community

### ***WHAT IS THE ALTERNATIVES TO VIOLENCE PROJECT?***

It is important to understand that AVP can be quite different with each workshop, and especially in different parts of the country and world. A loose sense of essential components are carried throughout all AVP workshops, but a high level of flexibility is given to each local chapter and to each group of facilitators who leads a particular workshop. Given this high level of flexibility, small changes in exercises and emphasis have been happening since AVP's inception. A national AVP group (<http://www.avpusa.org>) sets overall policy and does minimal coordination.

One of the (almost) universal practices for AVP workshops, include offering three levels of workshops: Basic, Advanced, and Training for Trainers. After a participant has completed all three levels of these workshops, they are invited to help co-facilitate future workshops. Teams of facilitators, ranging from 2 to 6 team members, typically lead workshops. In most prisons, facilitator teams are made up of a combination of inmate and outside community members. All facilitators of prison AVP workshops, both inmates and "outmates," are volunteers and do not receive financial payment for their time.

The core philosophy of AVP is called "Transforming Power." This is a way to describe the power of creative, proactive nonviolence. The idea is usually explored in workshops through personal stories, guidelines or tips for opening up to this power, and, ideally, through the experience of that power in the workshop. Building around this concept, the themes of conflict resolution, communication, affirmation, and community building are integrated into each workshop. A variety of exercises, games, and role plays help participants learn from each other and their own experience in relation to these themes.

I have facilitated about 30 weekend AVP workshops over the past six years, mostly in Minnesota. Facilitating my first prison AVP workshop, I was quickly

hooked into the process--both for my own personal growth and as a calling for the kind of work I want to do in the world. I am not writing this evaluation as an objective outsider, but as an enthusiastic AVPer who also has a passion for Restorative Justice. I have done victim/offender conferencing off and on for five years, gone to RJ conferences, and I am now studying RJ as part of a graduate program at Eastern Mennonite University.

***How Does AVP Embody the Principles of Restorative Justice?***

I do think there is a relationship between AVP & RJ only in that both are looking for nonviolent, peaceful and healing ways of addressing issues. In some sense, I might think of AVP as providing some of the "working tools" which help make possible a reparative or restorative solution to situations. AVP also does set a tone and philosophy that more or less 'welcomes' a restorative vs. a retributive solution to issues.

Alan Taplow, AVP facilitator, Vermont <sup>2</sup>

It has been posited that crime weakens, and often destroys, community bonds and relationships (Bazemore and Walgrave, 1997 at 10). Consistent with the underlying purposes of restorative justice, prisoner assistance programs attempt to develop in prisoners capacities which allow them to function in the legitimate community.

According to Bazemore and Walgrave, prisoner assistance programs provide opportunities for prisoners to make the transition from institutionalization to community membership, from stigmatized offender lacking social capital (Bazemore and Walgrave, 1997 at 33) to restored individual possessing marketable skills."

--Christopher Bright, Prison Fellowship International <sup>3</sup>

Many theorists describe Restorative Justice as the restoration of the victim, the community, and the offender. The Alternatives to Violence Project most directly addresses the restoration of the offender. As described by the Bright in the quote above, AVP fits into the "Prison Assistance" category as one expression of Restorative Justice values. A primary goal of AVP is to support inmates in rebuilding a positive sense of themselves and increase their capacity to live a peaceful life. A strong underlying assumption that I have seen in AVP is a belief that offenders often harm others out of a sense of their own brokenness. AVP aspires to move with participants toward wholeness, by developing nonviolent skills and relationship in prison.

As Alan Taplow described above, AVP and RJ share many underlying values and intentions. RJ theorists often contrast retributive and restorative approaches to justice. AVP makes the distinction between violent and nonviolent attempts at change. I believe that the relationship between violence

and retribution, and nonviolence and restoration is quite interconnected and clear. Both aspire toward healing and away from punishment. Both RJ and AVP seek constructive, collaborative methods to approach this healing.

Some recent surveys of RJ practices in prisons specifically mention AVP as an example of an RJ practice. In the article, "Restorative Justice in Custodial Settings: A Report for the Restorative Justice Working Group in Northern Ireland," Marian Liebmann and Stephanie Braithwaite survey different RJ applications in prisons. Braithwaite and Liebmann say, "Several projects consider Restorative Justice as a philosophy which can offer inmates new skills in handling conflict in the prison, whether with staff or other inmates." Their first example of this kind of RJ project is the Alternatives to Violence Project. In the same category as AVP they describe inmate-to-inmate mediation programs within prisons. Developing inmates' capacity for conflict resolution, through AVP or through mediation experiences, is one way to express Restorative Justice.

This paper does not attempt a comprehensive definition of Restorative Justice, or a complete list of its applications. As one jumping off point for the discussion of general RJ principles, I will use the list of "Restorative Justice Signposts" on a bookmark developed by Howard Zehr and Harry Mika. The list identifies ten qualities and guidelines for knowing when "We are working toward restorative justice." A list of these principles can be found in the appendix. Beyond this overview of RJ principles, I will draw from recent publications and personal conversations that apply RJ to prison settings.

I don't necessarily expect AVP, per se, to change in the ways I am suggesting. There is a growing need and demand for programs in prisons that are similar to AVP, which do take RJ principles more into account. So, some of these ideas might be relevant for modifying AVP workshops--and others might be useful in envisioning new or developing programs.

### ***How Could AVP Be More Restorative?***

"I've thought about this on and off for a week now, and I still can't see a strong relationship between RJ and AVP. RJ centers around the offense and the harm that's been done; AVP ignores what's been done in the past and focuses on a new approach to living in the future."

- Lenief Heimstead, AVP facilitator, Minnesota<sup>5</sup>

"I really don't look at AVP as having fully congruent goals to RJ, for many of the reasons you mention. When I'm participating in Vermont's Reparative Probation program, the focus is heavily weighted toward taking responsibility for one's actions, recognizing that all actions have consequences and most importantly repairing damage to victims, other affected parties and to the community at

large. In order to effectively do this, some of the underlying AVP philosophy (working tools) undoubtedly might help in influencing 'how' this restoration is accomplished, but I really don't look at AVP as directly addressing the restoration process itself."

-Alan Taplow, AVP facilitator, Vermont <sup>6</sup>

Viewing the Alternatives to Violence Project as an integral part of Restorative Justice is not a connection I have heard many AVP volunteers make. Many people who are involved with both AVP and RJ still see a large disconnect between them. One way to connect AVP more closely with RJ would be education of those involved in AVP about the principles of RJ and to initiate conversations about their connections between RJ and AVP. I believe that if AVP, as a group, began to view itself as a small part of the larger Restorative Justice movement, many of the rest of the ideas in the paper would find a natural expression in AVP. I see a change in self-identity of AVP as having the most potential for change.

While I disagree with Lenief that there is not a strong relationship between RJ and AVP, I think she also identified the central challenge in connecting them. When working with inmates, AVP does not focus on the crime an inmate has committed. AVP is primarily focused on helping that inmate develop skills to live more peacefully in the present and future. My understanding is that AVP avoids asking inmates about their crimes because its emphasis is on seeing the good and positive potential in each other. I think that one underlying concern is that dwelling on mistakes in the past could be a barrier to the way outside facilitators view inmate participants. In searching for this hidden good in all of us, AVP seeks personal transformation. What would AVP workshops be like if we believed that acknowledging and repairing the harms of past crimes was an essential part of personal transformation and healing? I will examine this question later in this paper.

In the past couple years, some Restorative Justice theorists have started writing about what prison programs would look like if they were based on RJ ideas. In the article "Restorative Principles in The Prison Setting - A Vision For The Future," Anne Mace describes what group work in prison, such as AVP, might look like:

"Group work [in a prison based on the values of Restorative Justice] could provide opportunities for developing or taking personal responsibility, for raising victim awareness, and for identifying ways to make reparation or work at restoring<sup>7</sup> the balance in relationships to which crime can do such damage."

According to Mace, the application of restorative justice principles in prison is seen as having four elements:

- "Work done in the prison to create more awareness amongst convicted prisoners of the impact of crime on victims and programmes of direct mediation between victims and offenders

- The establishment of a new direction for activities within prisons so that prisoners spend some of their time working for the benefit of others
- Remodeling the way disputes are settled within the prison and incorporating restorative principles into grievance and disciplinary procedures.
- Building a new relationship with the community outside the prison to emphasize the need for prisoners to be reconciled with the wider society and received back into it.

In upcoming sections of the paper, I will explore how AVP could respond to these four principles.

### ***AWARENESS OF VICTIM IMPACT AND HARM***

"The victim's perspective and interests aren't part of what gets addressed [in AVP]."

-- Lenief Heimsstead, AVP facilitator, Minnesota <sup>9</sup>

"As a survivor of domestic violence, I believe that AVP has upheld my perspective. My basic workshop started out with [an AVP exercise called] affirmation in twos. As a victim, I never heard so much affirmation. Along with the black and blue marks and swellings and damaged bones, came daily verbal abuse, not daily affirmation. Then came the "What is Violence" brainstorm. There I learned that silence is violence. The violence of domestic violence continues when good people are silent and when I do not speak up for myself but take the blame for my situation."

--Joan Bobier, AVP facilitator, New York <sup>10</sup>

"Who we are is not defined by one single event; most of us alternate between being a victim and an offender throughout our lives. I find the victim perspective is represented in AVP workshops inside; many participants will share events, especially from their childhood, where they were victimized, at times severely or brutally. "

--Marc Forget, AVP facilitator & RJ practitioner, Alberta, Canada <sup>11</sup>

As these quotes imply, perceptions about the relationship between AVP and the perspective of victims is mixed. Some people who have been victims of crime find the workshops very affirming and empowering, and others find them offensive and naive. Since most AVP workshops happen inside prisons, victim involvement is not an automatic, and I have never seen an awareness of victimization be an explicit goal of AVP.

One growing emphasis in Restorative Justice is making sure that victims' perspectives are represented in all RJ programs. From what I have seen and been part of, a conscious focus on this has been almost entirely absent from



my AVP up until this point. Of course, when AVP is done in prisons, the focus is on the inmates--but I want to explore ways of working with inmates in AVP that are more sensitive to what victims experience.

In most AVP workshops it quickly becomes apparent that almost everyone in prison has been a victim of some kind of violence. In almost every workshop, inmates tell stories of child abuse or other forms of abuse that they suffered, and the cycle of violence become apparent. Beyond physical violence inmates have suffered, many are victims of the criminal justice system. Many inmates say they are innocent of the crimes they are imprisoned for, and some of them are telling the truth. Despite the first hand experience of many kinds of victimization, I don't often hear inmates express empathy for the victims of their crimes during AVP workshops.

I recently had a conversation with a professional victim advocate about my experience doing AVP in prisons. I confessed to her that an awareness and sensitivity to the perspective of victims was largely absent in my work in prisons. While in prisons, I was focused on the inmates, their needs, and often saw the inmates as victims themselves. The person I was talking with recommended that, when I was talking with inmates in prison, that I imagine that I am always surrounded by a group of victims. She encouraged me to imagine that these victims could hear everything I said to the inmates. How would that circle of imagined people around me react to what I talked about with inmates? Even though the victims weren't physically there, she said, I had a responsibility to take their perspectives very seriously. If offenders were taking crimes they did lightly or dismissing any harm done to their victims, it was my responsibility to stand up for those victims. If those inmates were entirely focused on themselves and saw themselves as the primary victims, she encouraged me to confront them.

Without question, I have not lived up to this suggested standard when talking with inmates at AVP workshops. I believe that there are things that need to be talked about with inmates that might upset their victims--but I believe that victims' perspectives need to be taken quite seriously when doing any work with offenders. In my experience, the perspectives of crime victims are marginal, at best.

An increasing number of prison-based programs are starting to include victim-impact classes. Sometimes actual victims of crimes will speak with inmates about the range of impacts crime had upon their life. Offenders are encouraged to think through the various direct and indirect harms their crimes caused for their victims, the victim's family and friends, and the wider community. Some of these programs will ask the offenders to think of and follow through on ways to rebuild the damages that were done.

Changing AVP workshops to include victim-impact exercises seems like a large and hard to swallow stretch for the program. Most AVP facilitators I know already complain about not having enough time to cover the core exercises and

skills. The idea of adding extra activities and the extra goal of victim-impact awareness would further push a tight schedule. In addition, some prisons where AVP is offered hold separate victim impact classes, and some basics victim-impact activities in AVP might be repetitive. Despite these challenges, I believe that serious consideration needs to be given to the incorporation of victim-centered exercises in AVP workshops. Current exercises could be modified to meet this need, or ideas could be borrowed from other programs.

Since AVP workshops are offered in the community as well as prisons, and some workshops have been offered for groups that include many survivors of crime, such as women's shelters. It is my impression that connections with such groups have been limited. One effort to be more responsive to victims' needs might be offering workshops with victim-related groups. In doing more of these workshops with this different population, we would need to listen to the participants for how the program would need to be different, based on their experiences. I believe that increased contact for AVP with victim groups would naturally help change and improve prison workshops. Reaching out to victim groups would be one small way to bridge the worlds of victims and offenders. As Lenief Heimstead said in an email to me, "I think that for AVP to be integrated with RJ it would be need to . . . recognize that victim and offender are part of the same community"

In one AVP workshop I facilitated, a woman who had been a victim of a serious crime talked with me about her struggles with the workshop. To this woman, the message of the workshop frequently felt disempowering and offensive. Trainers and participants kept emphasizing how certain skills could prevent violent situations from happening. The message we were sending to this woman, without being aware of it, was that it was her fault that she had been the victim of a violent crime. The workshop was hard for her because she kept thinking, if only she had done something different when she was attacked, she could have stopped the crime. The woman was angry about our insensitivity and naiveté for sending those messages--and for not emphasizing enough that crime is not the victim's fault. We as AVP facilitators need to listen deeply to perspectives of people who are survivors of crime and let these voices help shape how we lead workshops.

In later sections of this paper, I will look at ways AVP might prepare offenders for interaction with or reparations for victims.

### ***INMATE ACCOUNTABILITY***

"In AVP the harm that's been done by whatever offense has been committed isn't talked about."

-- Lenief Heimstead, AVP facilitator, Minnesota <sup>12</sup>

"I agree totally with your concern over offender accountability. I would further say that the AVP model does not allow for the creative chaos, which is necessary to get to the roots of this accountability. The process is great for starting out with developing safety and trust . . . something that many, or even most of these incarcerated people seem to have never experienced. But that can be firmly put in place in a short time, and go on to deeper work."

-- Jean Handley, completed AVP Basic workshop, 3/01<sup>13</sup>  
works with other RJ programs

"In the last prison basic [AVP workshop] I facilitated, a prisoner volunteered to the group how his crack addiction affected his little girl. How on payday he spent his paycheck smoking crack on the corner and not spending time with his little girl or buying her a new pair of shoes when she had outgrown the old ones. Also, in the group, was a prisoner who admitted to being the crack distributor who liked the fancy car he drove and the fancy clothes he wore and who separated himself from the dealers and the users on the street. These two had a confrontation in the group and the distributor upon hearing the user's story admitted never thinking about it from the user's perspective. The distributor experienced a transformation, and now this once tough guy is all smiles when an inmate facilitator or myself sees him in the prison. I do not ask inmates to talk about their crime, but sometimes they volunteer the information. Sometimes, I think to myself, 'Why did they tell me that? I did not ask to hear it.'"

-- Joan Bobier, AVP facilitator, New York<sup>14</sup>

From the viewpoint of Restorative Justice, going hand in hand with victim-impact awareness, is the accountability of offenders for their crimes. In the "Signposts of Restorative Justice," the fourth principle is to "support offenders while encouraging them to accept and carry out their obligations." From this view, offenders have obligations to repair the harm their crimes have done.

As the quotations above reflect, AVP facilitators typically do not ask inmates about the crimes they committed or about the effects of those crimes. But, as Joan describes, sometime inmate participants will describe these experiences in workshops without prompting. I want to explore what AVP would be like if we saw inmate accountability for their crimes as an essential part of living a nonviolent life.

One way to move toward this concern in AVP workshop is to include exercises that deal with the nature of apology.

"Some time ago Fred Feucht contributed a very useful exercise, Anatomy of an Apology. I've used that very successfully. It fits in well at the Advanced [workshop] when the subject has to do with responsibility, communication, or forgiveness. Actually it fits with almost any topic. There are so many inmates who have tried saying, 'I'm sorry,' only to get turned down, so to speak. They didn't feel heard and were at a loss what to do next. (This applies in many contexts, not just RJ.)"

-- AVP facilitator, US <sup>15</sup>

After participants complete a Basic AVP workshop, they are eligible to take an Advanced workshop. Most Advanced workshops spend the first couple hours having the participants decide, by consensus, on a topic for the weekend. The intent is to build upon the general nonviolence skills of the Basic workshop--but to focus on a specific way of applying nonviolence in our lives. As the following description highlights, these workshops can be an opportunity to invite offender accountability:

"I'm wondering if anyone has ever had an Advanced where the subject had to do specifically with making up for what you've done in a way that's meaningful. I had one workshop like this when it turned out early on that one of the outside participants was the mother of a murdered adult child. The topic chosen was Forgiveness and Reconciliation. It seemed as if every participant (the mother included) was processing the possibility of being face-to-face with the "other side." I would go so far as to say that such a meeting seems to be one of the very secret needs AND fears all 'AVP-open' prisoners have. I think that doing AVP just as we do it can open up the inmate to the possibility of facing his victim, or his fear and provide him or her with the communication tools to make the next step. That may be writing a letter, including expressing the willingness for a face-to-face. Beyond that the process is in the hands of the Victim-Offender Mediation programs or those politically active on the outside. I don't underestimate the skills and patience needed to facilitate the actual encounters and I don't pretend to step into that area of expertise.

-- AVP facilitator, U.S. <sup>16</sup>

As the facilitator in the second quotation describes, some Advanced AVP workshops have focused the whole weekend on forgiveness and apology. To build intellectual and emotional understandings forgiveness, apology, and accountability could be one contribution of AVP toward offender accountability. Given the current structure of AVP workshops, I think the Advanced workshop holds great possibility for more direct inclusion of restorative justice practices, especially related to offender accountability. Although the participants decide on the focus of the workshop by consensus, the facilitators set the stage for this decision, and often provide an initial range of options for participants to choose from. If facilitators saw accountability as an essential part of personal transformation, I believe participants would reflect this in their choice of topics

for Advanced workshops. In addition to standard Advanced workshops, several regions of AVP have initiated additional "advanced" Advanced workshops with pre-set topics, such as racism. Offender accountability or several other RJ themes would fit well in these supplemental pre-set topic workshops.

Taking support of offender accountability one step further, AVP workshops could consciously be designed to relate to work inmates are doing to repair the harms of their crimes. "Restorative work" would include repairing, symbolically or literally, damages the inmate's actions had on the community and the victim. This would require further coordination with prison officials and other prison programs, but I think that it is worth dreaming of. Anne Mace describes how this might look:

"Prison education programmes could be specifically designed to relate to the kind of restorative work being undertaken by prisoners. Improving literacy and numeracy, increasing knowledge of communities and their needs, providing opportunities to consider relevant local and national current affairs all suggest themselves as topics, which could have a clear link with work experience and its requirements, and may have lasting value for the prisoner. Other opportunities might include learning about environmental issues, including conservation and recycling. Social skills teaching associated with the need of virtually all prisoners to rebuild relationships, restore self-esteem and resume citizenship outside the world of the institution could be based on each prisoner's involvement in restorative and reparative work during the sentence, whether that involved work on relationships or practical work to make redress."

In addition to the social skill and self-esteem development that AVP encourages, AVP also prepares inmates to do the restorative work of co-leading future AVP workshops. I think that one area where AVP already exemplifies RJ values is in its empowerment of inmates and former inmates to give back to their communities. Since AVP invites anyone who has completed all three levels of the workshops to help co-lead future workshops, this is a vehicle for inmates to give back to fellow inmates in prison, and to their neighborhoods once they are released. Since a team of both inmate and outside volunteers lead most prison AVP workshops, this support for "restorative work" by inmates already exists. In addition, inmates are encouraged to continue leading community AVP workshops once they are released from prison. But I believe this restorative aspect of AVP could be emphasized even more. Restorative Justice Signpost number eight encourages "collaboration and reintegration, rather than coercion and isolation." Given the relationships and techniques AVP has developed, it holds a capacity to help with reintegration of the offender through their giving back to the community as AVP volunteers.

When inmates who have been involved with AVP are released from prison, some continue to be involved with AVP on the outside, and some lose touch with the organization. Many former inmates are very interested in volunteering with AVP in schools and in the community, but most of these people are so overwhelmed by the transition out of prison, that volunteering their time for AVP gets lost in the mix. I believe that one way that community AVP groups could support Restorative Justice principles is to help make facilitating community AVP activities more accessible to former inmates. I have written a paper proposing one way this could be done (<http://home.planetcomm.net/bischoff/grant.html>), but there are many ways former inmates could be invited to continue facilitating AVP workshops once they are released.

Even before inmates are released, AVP groups have the potential to support inmates in other ways of giving back to the wider community. A group of inmate AVP facilitators at the Sing Sing prison in New York started an initiative to reduce violence within the prison. This group held educational programs to reach the large group of inmates at the prison who would never attend an AVP workshop. I see this kind of inmate work as very connected with the principles of Restorative Justice. If we saw AVP as one way to prepare inmates for giving back to the community, that would have also lead to changes in the way AVP workshops are done and followed up on.

### ***BUILDING CONNECTIONS WITH THE REST OF THE COMMUNITY***

In Anne Mace's envisioning of what a restorative prison would look like, she describes increased connections with the outside community:

The restorative regime focus that is being suggested would also provide the basis for recruitment of volunteers and visitors to help in a prison, making it clear that their role and activities would contribute to a relationship between the prison, the prisoners & the community with great potential value for all. <sup>18</sup>

From the beginning, AVP has been one of the rare chances for inmates to have meaningful interactions with volunteers from outside the prison. In addition to the volunteer AVP facilitators, several prison AVP programs bring in outside community members as participants for workshops. Community members learning, alongside inmates, about nonviolence, have proven to be a very restorative process for many people.

In working toward a broader contribution to RJ, AVP groups can encourage more community participants to do AVP workshops in prisons. We can bring in college students for their classes, invite state legislatures to participate and learn about realities in prisons, or offer victims of crime a chance to participate in prison workshops as part of their healing process. In these connections, I think AVP plays a part in lessening the wall between prison and the rest of the



community. Restorative Justice Signpost number seven says, "involve and empower the affected community through the justice process." Participation as volunteers or as participants in prison AVP workshops provides one meaningful way for community members to be a part of the justice process.

#### **AVP/RJ PARTNERSHIPS**

"As I see it, AVP's involvement is not so much restorative justice itself, but rather to give the offender the insight to realize the damage done by his conduct, and the empathy to be able to enter into some sort of restorative justice process thereafter."

-- Martin Hattersley, AVP facilitator, Edmonton, Canada

"I can much more envision AVP being a part of training for doing RJ work than RJ being a focus for AVP."

-- Alan Taplow, AVP facilitator, Vermont

Realistically, I don't expect much about AVP workshops to change from this paper or the ideas of Restorative Justice. Over the last 25 years, AVP has developed a niche and self-identity, which has great power, and fundamental changes in that are hard to imagine. Beyond the difficulty of making changes in how AVP is done, I think some of the changes I have explored in this paper would take away some of the power AVP currently has. I think the most realistic potentials for AVP and Restorative Justice to synthesize is through partnerships. I see great possibilities for AVP groups working more intentionally with RJ programs in their areas.

As Alan and Martin refer to, the empathy, communication skills, and self-awareness that AVP cultivates can be useful in preparing people to enter into other RJ processes. These skills are drawn upon for both offenders and victims in any facilitated dialogue with each other. As the facilitator quoted in the previous section described, preparation for an encounter with victims is already happening for many inmates in some AVP workshops. Since this preparation is already happening, with very little intention, I would love to see this connection be made more explicitly in AVP workshops. Minimally, AVP facilitators can learn about the possibilities for direct and indirect offender/victim encounters in their area. AVP facilitators can also have in mind some options inmates could follow up on if they had a desire for this kind of communication. If we are encouraging these next steps, we also need to know about some of the dynamics and related cautions. An in person meeting with a victim might be inappropriate, but letter writing and role-playing might be useful steps for the inmate and/or victim. Facilitators might contact victim services staff in their area or prison counselors to explore these possibilities and the concerns.

AVP could also work intentionally to compliment other restoratively based programs at the prison. One women's prison I worked with in Minnesota told me one day they had decided to start a peer mediation program for inmates, and that AVP was going to do the training for this new mediation program. I told this prison staff person that I thought a mediation program at the prison would be great--but that we as AVP weren't really trained to offer that. I offered to help the prison connect with local mediation centers that might help with that

project. I think it would be wonderful if AVP in prisons could be intimately connected with conflicts in prison being dealt with in a restorative way. It might be hard to imagine this change happening, but I certainly didn't imagine that the prison administration would ask us to start their mediation program.

"Mike, our workshops are so short! . . . There are sometimes other programs (Man Alive, ManKind, etc.) that meet weekly for six months or so and we can encourage inmates to participate in those."

-- AVP facilitator, U.S. <sup>19</sup>

Some other programs that fall into the "prisoner assistance" do a better job at incorporating victim-impact awareness and offender accountability than AVP. As this facilitator says, we can encourage inmates in AVP to also participate in these programs. As AVPers, we can build relationships with the staff and volunteers of other prison programs, and think of ways our programs can compliment each other's.

In thinking of ways inmates can do restorative work and give back to the community, we can ask people at the prison what options inmates have for community service work while in prison or on parole. We can encourage prisons and inmates to develop these possibilities, and view community service as a natural next step after an AVP workshop.

" I have also done a fair amount of RJ/Victim Impact training and panels with inmates. . . . usually a 4-5 day retreat type setting and then follow up group meetings once a month or more if time allows. I hope that this can develop into an ongoing group, something I have called "Prison Peacemakers" for right now. The idea is to create something sustainable that helps them be accountable and restorative in all walks of life and live non-violently while in prison and when (if) they get out. "

-- Bruce Kittle, RJ practitioner, Iowa

The program Bruce describes is very similar to ways I imagine what AVP would look like if it were reshaped according to RJ principles. I think Bruce's program also hints at how AVP could be linked more closely with other RJ initiatives. Since there are already thousands of inmates in the country who have gone through AVP and formed communities around that experience--I see those groups as fertile ground for the "prison peacemaker" type of groups that Bruce describes. I think that the existing body of inmates who have been through AVP workshops is a great resource to draw from and look to in the development of similar RJ programs. AVP groups could partner with people like Bruce to create ongoing accountability and peacemaking groups in prisons. The program Bruce describes provides a tangible example of how AVP might look if it connected its current focus of peacemaking and personal change with the RJ principles of accountability and restoration for the harm done.



I have heard of one AVP group that has consciously built a partnership with their local Restorative Justice group. Sue Ward describes the first steps of this partnership, which I hope will be a spark for AVP groups in other places:

The Restorative Justice Coalition and AVP Victoria, two groups run co-operatively by inmates and community volunteers, have recently joined together to offer a series of workshops that are open to the public as well as the inmate population. The first was using AVP material on forgiveness and grief with the usual community building. The next one will be including more of a direct restorative justice focus; a mix of AVP material and family group conferencing role-plays involving moderate range crimes (not the usual lower level diversion cases - shoplifting, mischief etc).

--Sue Ward, AVP/RJ partnership participant, British Columbia, Canada

Dialogue about the principles of Restorative Justice and their application is opening a lot of doors around criminal justice to the values AVP has always been acting on. Building partnerships with other RJ groups has the potential to move AVP and RJ's goals forward in creative, dynamic ways.

### ***THINKING BIGGER: RESTORATIVE PRISONS, RESTORATIVE SOCIETY***

Beyond the specific changes Restorative Justice principles point to for AVP workshop, I see one of the biggest gifts of RJ as the invitation to re-envision the whole of the criminal justice system according to different values. AVP is just one program that operates within the confines of the prison system. Currently, AVP does not bring clear proposals for how the entire prison system could be different. Restorative Justice takes many of the values in AVP and thinks through the implication of those values for the range of our responses to crime. Many AVP volunteers I know have a wish that AVP contribute to social change, and especially to a restructuring of the way criminal justice works in this country--but AVP does not carry any crisp visions for alternatives to the present system.

The theory and practice of RJ can provide AVP with a broader framework and vision for deep changes in our criminal justice system. While RJ in this country began by focusing on victim/offender mediation in minor criminal cases, the range of RJ applications is spreading to all aspects of crime and society. As the articles cited in this paper attest to, RJ theorists are beginning to envision what a restorative prison would look like. The more AVP can connect its values with a vision for an alternative prison system, the more potential there will be for widespread, structural application of AVP's ideals. All of us AVPers who complain about the evils of the current criminal justice system have an obligation to propose and work toward alternatives. Restorative Justice helps us in that direction.

One initial step in this wider transformation of the criminal justice system (and society) are changes within the prisons where AVP operates. AVPers can begin to initiate dialogue with prison staff, community members and policy makers about RJ and the overall nature of the prison.

"At a medium secure prison in Victoria, British Columbia, offenders, correctional staff, programme staff, parole officers and members of the community discuss restorative justice on a weekly basis." <sup>20</sup>

As RJ ideas spread into prison practice, the relationships AVP has within prisons have great potential for furthering those changes. I believe that there is a danger that AVP, by helping make prison life a little easier and kinder, can perpetuate the structural harms of the current prison system and the current correctional system. Unless we connect the rehabilitate work of AVP to discussions about alternative policies and practices for prisons, we run the danger of reinforcing more violence than we alleviate.

This broader vision might point to more training and dialogue between AVP facilitators and corrections staff and policy makers. It might lead to customizing AVP workshops for them, or it might mean working more collaboratively with them.

"We could start to think about the aims of prison sentences and the way time is spent in prison in quite a different manner. We could think about the potential and the opportunities for change in the relationship between communities and the prisons located within their midst. We could look to broaden and build upon what some prisoners achieve through individual programmes by offering the vast majority of prisoners opportunities to be linked through positive work and activities to the communities to which they have to return. We might start from a premise that a prisoner has the capacity to function as an accountable person, capable of good as well as bad actions and able to use an opportunity in prison to offer redress or make amends for past harm or damage done, whether that be to individual victims or the community." <sup>21</sup>

Beyond a vision of a restorative prison, AVP will have more power if it operates within a motivating vision for a changed society. If AVP aims to be contributing to long-term social change, and not solely change for individuals, it needs to operate with a vision of what we are working toward.

In addition to Restorative Justice, there are other important conceptual frameworks that can help AVP push itself to broader visions. I would like to see AVP evaluated according to the framework of undoing racism and oppression, of multi-level peace building (such as John Paul Lederach's models), and violence-prevention, for example. At this moment in criminal justice's evolution in the U.S., there is great potential and momentum in Restorative Justice. I challenge all those involved with AVP to look closely at the lessons and challenges this framework can offer us.

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### FOOTNOTES

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- 2 From personal email.
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- 8 Ibid.
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- 10 Ibid.
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- 18 Ibid, 5.
- 19 Personal email.

## **Restorative Justice Signposts**

Howard Zehr, Harry Mika, Mennonite Central Committee

We are working toward restorative justice when we . . .

1. Focus on the harms of wrongdoing more than the rules that have been broken;
2. Show equal concern and commitment to victims and offenders, involving both in the process of justice;
3. Work toward the restoration of victims, empowering them and responding to their needs as they see them;
4. Support offenders while encouraging them to accept and carry out their obligations;
5. Recognize that while obligations may be difficult for offenders, they should not be intended as harms, and they must be achievable;
6. Provide opportunities for dialogue, direct or indirect, between victims and offenders as appropriate;
7. Involve and empower the affected community through the justice process, and increase its capacity to recognize and respond to community bases of crime;
8. Encourage collaboration and reintegration, rather than coercion and isolation;
9. Give attention to the unintended consequences of our actions and programs; and
10. Show respect to all parties, including victims, offenders, and justice colleagues.